

E. H. Gombrich, The Debate on Primitivism in Ancient Rhetoric, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes., Vol. 29, 1966, pp.24-38 [Trapp no.1966B.1]

The great reversal of taste that began when the Romantics sought out the primitives and that led a hundred years later to the enthusiasm for Negro sculpture among the Cubists owed much of its impetus to a reaction against the classical doctrine.[1] Yet, paradoxically, the arguments and ideas on which it thrived were largely derived from the tradition it attacked. For it was the classical tradition which contrasted the idea of perfection with the dangers of corruption and denounced any striving for outward show that pandered to the senses. The same arguments that were used by Winckelmann to condemn Bernini and to extol the nobility of simplicity could be used by the Nazarenes to throw suspicion on Raphael and to glorify Fra Angelico. Not only are these arguments built into the edifice of classical doctrine. They had been prefigured and amply rehearsed in classical antiquity.[2] They must have been familiar to eighteenth and nineteenth century readers from authors they had presumably read at school. Perhaps it was precisely because these ideas and formulations had been so completely absorbed into the bloodstream of European thought that they were so frequently accepted without further questioning. No more is intended in the following pages than to provide a critical conspectus of these well-known passages.[3] They will be seen to form an indispensable background for the understanding of developments in art and taste which have not yet spent their force – the problems raised by technical progress.

Classical civilisation is the first, as far as we can tell, in which this idea of progress became articulate and elicited in its turn a critical examination of its value. This examination, as has been shown,[4] could draw on the inherent conservatism of all civilisations in which change is equated with decay and disaster. For if the idea of progress is of comparatively recent growth, the ideas of decline and corruption must have existed in all cultures. There always were *laudatores temporis acti* who talked of the good old days when things were better. The reasons given for the deplorable state of things, bad weather, bad harvests, high prices and loose morals must have varied, but one theme recurred in the past as it occurs today, the slackness of religious observance, the slovenly execution of divine ordinances. In civilisations where art and rituals are inextricably interwoven this frame of mind makes the admission of progress all but impossible. For sacred ritual cannot, in the nature of things 'progress', though it can clearly decline. Religion knows of re-form, the return to unsullied practice as instituted by the founder or performed by virtuous ancestors. It cannot hail deliberate departures from the ancient pattern as improvements because such departures which have no authority in the past are *ipso facto* impertinent if not blasphemous. It is well known that both the ritual and the arts of these ancient conservative civilisations did in fact change but these slow alterations do not exclude the likelihood that it was the conscious ambition of the master craftsman of ancient Egypt or China to do as well as the ancient masters of legendary times who had created the renowned cult images, with their proven efficacy. Departure from their canon might have meant departure from their power.

It is thus no mere accident that the first great philosophical opponent of the Greek faith in progress pointed to Egypt as the model, the civilisation where art and ritual were one and neither was allowed to change. I am alluding to Plato's famous reference in the *Laws* (II, 656D) to the ten thousand year old Egyptian images, which secure the immutability of ritual movements. Here, as elsewhere, Plato is concerned with preserving the perfect pattern from the dangers of corruption which are inherent in all earthly existence, mixed as it is with the debilitating dross of matter. In Plato's philosophy, of course, the pattern or idea can never be fully realised here on earth but we can, alas, drift even further away from it. In the mythical past the state and its institutions still reflected the idea of Justice, but every

generation will tend to adulterate the tradition by introducing new concessions to the mob or new musical modes which will effeminate the rulers.

Plato's political and philosophical views are of relevance to our theme only in so far as his concern with the dangers of corruption focused on one particular element in Greek life, the study of rhetoric. It was he, after all, who gave the sophists their bad name, for the sophists were the teachers of oratory. In dialogue after dialogue Plato pilloried this new class of teachers as the true corruptors of youth, who pandered to the lower faculties of the soul and taught the tricks of persuasion rather than the search for truth. If we today speak of sophistry this is due to Plato's propaganda, which may not always have been just. Unfortunately his propaganda has been so effective that only small fragments of the writings of the sophists have come down to us. But even these, together with other evidence, allow us to infer that the sophists deserved their reputation, which lives on in another strange term of our language and an awareness of its effects on the emotions, which was certainly open to abuse but which also stimulated reflections and discussions on the nature of speech.

Be that as it may, the stigma of corruption, the accusation of impurity and affectation settled, rightly or wrongly, on the tradition of oratory that started from Plato's famous opponent Gorgias.[5] Gorgias is habitually represented as the arch-sophist, who flattered the ear with empty jingles and lulled the senses with rhythmical cadences and with the false brilliance of an antithetical style in which the rational argument was the first casualty. The centres in which this tradition was cultivated led to this school of oratory being known as the Asiatic style. The label may have added to its reputation of ostentation and depravity. For the Asiatic world, in the eyes of the Greeks, was the world of tyrants and eunuchs, the world of luxury and adulation which had corrupted even the moral fibre of Alexander the Great. Against this dangerous intrusion the Greeks, as later the Romans, liked to pit their idea of the native virtue and the sterling quality of their ancestral ways. Ideas of patriotism thus mixed with conservatism in matters of language, as they have often done since. The exotic, the newfangled word or phrase is a hallmark of affection and servility to fashion. The reformer of language, like the reformer of religion, raises the banner of purity, of a return to origins and a contempt of innovations.

This is the background against which we must see the momentous debates of the school which broke out in Rome in the period of Julius Caesar, the debate between Atticists and Asianists.[6] The violence with which one party accused the other of moral turpitude can be gauged from the writings of a Greek teacher of rhetoric who had settled in Rome, Dionysius of Halicarnasus.[7] In a famous letter to his pupil and patron, Ammaeus, which served as an introduction to a book on ancient orators, Dionysius pours forth his abuse against the rival school of corrupters and pays tribute to the Roman aristocracy which had stemmed this evil flood and restored the ancient virtues of speech.[8] In this emphasis on the need to stop the decline and to restore the purity of ancestral ways Dionysius obviously chimed in with the movement that culminated in the Principate of Augustus.

Great is the gratitude due to our own age, most excellent Ammaeus, not only on account of the recent improvement in other pursuits, but above all because of the great advance made in the study of civic oratory. In the times before our own the ancient and philosophic rhetoric was flouted, grossly outraged, and brought lower and lower. Its decline and gradual decay began with the death of Alexander of Macedon, and in our own generation it reached the verge of final extinction. Another rhetoric stole into its place – one intolerably ostentatious, shameless and dissolute, and without part in philosophy or any other liberal discipline. Craftily it deluded the ignorant multitude. Not only did it live in greater affluence, and luxury and style than its predecessor, but it attached to itself those offices and those foremost public positions which should have been held by the philosophic rhetoric. Very vulgar it was and offensive, and in the end it reduced Hellas to the same plight as the households of

miserable prodigals. For just as in their houses the wedded wife, free-born and virtuous, sits with no authority over what is hers, while a riotous mistress, by her presence spreading confusion in the home, claims rule over all the property, spurning the intimidating the wife; so in every city and not least (which was the worst calamity of all) in the recognised centres of culture, the Attic Muse, ancient and sprung from the soil though she was, had been robbed of her dignities and covered in dishonour, whereas her rival, who had come but yesterday from one of the dens of Asia, a Mysian or Phrygian wanton or some Carian abomination, presumed to govern Greek states, driving the true queen from the public council chambers – the ignorant ousting the philosophic, the wild the chaste ... I believe the fortunate turn of events was caused and originated by Rome, the mistress of the world, who drew all eyes upon herself. The principal agents were members of the ruling classes of Rome, distinguished by their high character and by their excellent conduct of public affairs ... I should not be surprised if that former fashion of insensate oratory failed to survive another generation.[9]

What is so characteristic about this outburst is its appeal to authority to stop the rot and the hope which is expressed that Roman might will stamp out the offenders. The link with Plato's authoritarianism and his faith in the guardians of tradition could not be more clear. Yet this old quarrel of rival schools would easily have been forgotten had it not been for the fact that the greatest orator of the Roman world became involved in it and had to spend the last years of his life in defending himself against the suspicion of Asiatic leanings. It was Cicero who was thus called up to plead on his own behalf before the court of history and to defend his life work against the accusations of a group of young Atticists, whose leader was Brutus. If there ever was a doubt whether Cicero was a great lawyer, these writings in his own cause could silence it. For in these two last dialogues, the Brutus and the Orator, Cicero marshals all the arguments to defend his position and, indeed, his reputation in history. It is in this gathering of evidence that he draws in the visual arts, thus establishing or fortifying the link between the criticism of rhetoric and of art which made this debate so memorable for both traditions. In their need to characterise the various types of speech ancient critics had frequently resorted to comparisons with other subjects.[10] The student was reminded of games and athletics in the characterisation of styles as spare and lean or supple and heavy.[11] Similar contrasts could be illustrated with reference to music such as the soothing tones of pipes and the rousing clash of dithyrambic cymbals.[12] Architecture offered the contrast between the 'cyclopic' walls erected from huge irregular blocks as against the smooth polish of an elegant edifice;[13] and sculpture the similar opposition between archaic rigidity and sophisticated grace.[14] It was on this comparison that Cicero seized when he found his own style criticised for its concessions to Asianism. The writings of Brutus and his Atticists friends, in which these blasphemies were uttered, have been lost but we can infer from Cicero's reply that his style was in fact called 'too soft to be manly'.[15] The Atticists pointed to the earlier models of artistic perfection, notably to the purity of the style of Lysias, which was free from any striving for effects.

In one sense Cicero had an easy game. It was not very consistent to ask Latin orators to return to an Attic model. After all, Cicero's own self-confidence in his achievements and his place in history rested on his contribution to Latin speech, on his life-long work in bringing his native tongue up to the standard of suppleness for which the Romans envied the Greeks. It was this tangible achievement which made Cicero aware of the possibility of real progress. It was thus not inconsistent of him to ask his opponents in the Brutus whether they really wanted to put the clock back, and if so why they did not propose to return to the plain and homely style of Cato who would represent the 'primitive' phased of oratory more adequately for a Roman than Lysias. For those who admire simplicity and roughness Cato would be an excellent model, for clearly his style has many virtues (67). But then it must be admitted that he is not yet sufficiently polished and that greater perfection is possible. He simply lived before the art had reached its height. No art ever comes to perfection the moment it is invented (71).

It is here, then, that Cicero resorts to the comparison with sculpture and painting which was never far from the orator's mind.[16] That these arts had made progress in ancient Greece when the rigid idols of archaic temples were replaced by those perfect evocations of the gods which were still admired in the Roman world was not open to doubt. Perhaps, indeed, it was this momentous emancipation from ritualistic traditions in art which gave the Greek world its first awareness of progress. The monuments and statues of earlier generations still stood, to be contrasted with the triumph of living masters, and by and large, so it seems, the Greeks were looking at their own archaic art with a patronising smile. Those were the days when painters had to write under each figure what it meant to make it recognisable, as Aristotle implies.[17] By the end of the fourth century when naturalism had reached its height, critics began to trace this epic of progress and to write the first histories of art.[18] It was on these that Cicero could fall back in illustrating the idea of progress towards perfection:

What critic who devotes his attention to the lesser arts does not recognise that the statues of Canachus are too rigid to reproduce the truth of nature? The statues of Calamis again are still hard, and yet more lifelike than those of Canachus. Even Myron has not yet fully attained naturalness, though one would not hesitate to call his works beautiful. Still more beautiful are the statues of Polyclitus, and indeed in my estimate quite perfect. The same developments may be seen in painting. In Zeuxis, Polygnotus, Timanthes, and others, who used only four colours, we praise their outline and drawing; but in Aetion, Nicomachus, Protogenes, Apelles, everything has been brought to perfection (70).

This is the classic formulation of the very faith against which primitivism revolts; for when Vasari wrote his story of the progress of art from Cimabue to Michelangelo he explicitly referred to this passage in Cicero's *Brutus* and marvelled at the exact parallel between ancient and modern developments.[19]

We cannot identify the artists mentioned by Cicero with any degree of assurance, but we have no difficulty in exemplifying the type of progress he had in mind from the extant works of Greek sculpture. In fact there is no history of art in which some such sequence is not demonstrated. We know the type of sixth-century statue that is, in Cicero's words, 'too rigid to reproduce the truth of nature'. We can imagine the next phase 'still hard but yet softer' as represented by one of the *kouroi* of around 500 B.C. We have also a sufficient idea of the art of Myron, though copies and accounts of it, to appreciate what Cicero meant when he said 'one would not hesitate to call his works beautiful, though they are not yet quite sufficiently close to the truth'. We can see finally why he called Polycleitus more beautiful still and attaining perfection – an academic verdict which was no doubt also connected with the fame of Polycleitus as the sculptor who had established the canon of proportions. We are less well placed to appreciate the progress of painting, particularly as encountered in Cicero, but it is noteworthy that he sees perfection here largely as a technical advance in the use of colours and that he places the apex more than a century later than Polycleitus.

Cicero, that is, really looked at art in the light of its technical powers to achieve certain ends. The end, here, is truth and beauty. It is important to distinguish this instrumental view of progress from those interpretations with which we are familiar in our own day. The classical view, as I have argued elsewhere,[20] comes quite legitimately to the idea of a final stage beyond which the tool can no longer be perfected. It was in this light that Cicero saw his own art, the art of oratory, and he may perhaps be forgiven if he thought that as far as Latin oratory goes it was he who had brought it to this final stage. He may be forgiven precisely because posterity has, after all, tended to endorse this proud claim – whether under the hypnotic influence of Cicero's own propaganda or on an objective estimate of his powers it is now impossible to decide. But one thing is clear. Cicero did not rest his

claim on any vague or elusive idea of aesthetic excellence but on the down-to-earth conception of oratory as an instrument of persuasion.

It is as a practical man, a lawyer who has spent his life in the law courts, that he opposes the *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism of his Atticist critics. The test of his speech is whether it works. If you visit the courts and see that the judge is bored or that his attention wanders, you know that the speaker fails in his purpose. The good speaker must be a spell-binder. He must be able to play on the emotions of the learned and the unlearned alike. Success is what counts (185).

Cicero is careful here to distinguish his own art of persuasion from poetry where very different standards apply. The poet writes for the few and elect. Cicero tells the moving anecdote of the flautist who consoled his pupil for the lack of response among the public with the words 'Play for me and for the Muses' (187) and of the poet who watched his whole audience sneaking away while he read his work and said that he would read on as long as Plato stayed (191). But if Brutus made a similar claim for a speech it would be ridiculous. Not that mediocre orators never had success, but when a better practitioner turns up he will draw the crowds. This it is clear was Cicero's experience and with this argument from progress towards perfection he hoped to silence his critics. Of course in a way he had only sidestepped their argument. The charge of corruption was quite compatible with the admission of popular success. It is no wonder therefore that Cicero had to return to the issue once more in a second dialogue, *The Orator*, in which he expounds the aesthetics of oratory as distinct from its history.

In this dialogue Cicero returns to the classic preoccupation with the idea of perfection. It is an idea (as he knows) which cannot be realised here on earth and for that very reason he spurns those who seek it in the past. Aristotle was not deterred from pursuing philosophy by the existence of Plato, nor should we by that of Aristotle. 'Even craftsmen were not prompted to abandon their art because of the beauty of certain works by Protogenes, Apelles, Phidias or Polycleitus but tried to find out 'what they could achieve and where they could progress' (5).

It is precisely, in fact, because absolute perfection is unattainable that progress is always possible in some respect. Now the perfect orator would be a master of all effects. He could play on the instrument of speech as an organist plays on his organ and the more stops he has on his instrument the closer he will be to perfection. Cicero here expounds the old doctrine of the various manners of speech, the *genera dicendi* which the orator must master.[21] There are basically three such styles ranging between the grand manner on the one extreme and the plain style in the armoury of the orator and each can be used with effect, provided we pay attention to the subject for which the styles are appropriate. Cicero here makes use of the much discussed rules of 'decorum', the warning to orators to adjust their style of speaking to the subject in hand, to avoid bombastic pleading in a trivial matter but also trivial and casual speech in momentous issues. For us this large body of teaching is of relevance only because this awareness of different effects appropriate to different occasions sharpened the eyes of ancient critics for differences in style and counteracted to some extent the model of progress for which only bad or good style could exist. In fact, Cicero makes an important concession to the Atticists here. The Attic style does indeed represent one perfect mode, but, after all, it is only one stop on the grand organ of speech. What is wrong with the Atticists is their exclusiveness.

In the case of painting, some like pictures rough, rude and sombre, others on the contrary prefer them bright, cheerful and brilliantly coloured. How can you draw up a rule or formula when each is supreme in its own class, and there are many classes?

Moreover taste is one thing, practice another. There is nothing against appreciating the rough style of Thucydides, but to imitate it is another matter. "Are men so perverse as to live on acorns after grain has been discovered?" (30-31). If the earliest kind of painting, with few pigments, delights some people more than the perfected method, this is one thing, but must we therefore imitate the archaic style and repudiate what had come after? (169). Far from being a sign of corruption, the new devices to which the Atticists object, such as the introduction of rhythmical cadences, were adopted by all. Of course they would always have to be used with restraint, but that is again a question of expediency rather than of aesthetic dogmatism. You cannot use the grand manner all the time without becoming ridiculous. A Speech must not consist of climaxes. In this respect, Cicero infers, the grand manner has indeed more pitfalls than the plain or medium styles. An orator who cannot say anything plainly or calmly will scarcely look sane. He will be like a drunken reveller in the midst of sober men (99).

In making this concession, Cicero showed that he knew very well what had caused the reaction against that indulgence in effects which was identified with Asianism. He admitted that there could be too much of a good thing and that the orator had to keep a delicate balance between the striving after effect and the cult of simplicity.

And yet Cicero would not have admitted that this concession was in any way damaging to his case. For in his eyes this need for restraint was not a moral problem at all. It had nothing to do with avoiding corruption. It was quite simply a matter of craftsmanship for it, too was concerned with the mastery of effects. The good orator must above all be a psychologist who knows how to manipulate the hearer's emotions. It was a matter of simple observation that a surfeit of effects could create resistance and even disgust. This being so, the true artist among orators will use the effects of restraint as he will use those of abandon.

Cicero had expounded this psychological theory even before he had come into open conflict with the Atticists. We find this crucial passage in his dialogue *De Oratore*, which is the most complete and most serene of Cicero's expositions of the art of oratory. We need not exclude the possibility that even in this slightly earlier work Cicero's attention had been drawn to the problem of corruption and its psychological effects by the discussions of the evils of Asianism in the Rome of his time. Be that as it may, Cicero's meditations on the limits of effects and the unexpected vagaries of taste must rank among the most important reflections on the topic of primitivism – important precisely because they brush aside the argument between progress or corruption in which these debates normally become entangled.

It is hard to say what might be the reason, why the very things that most delight our senses and appeal to them most at first sight are the same of which we are most speedily estranged by a kind of surfeit and disgust. How much do not new paintings excel earlier ones in brightness and variety of colours, and yet though they may appeal to us at first, they soon rough and old-fashioned appearance. In singing, how much softer and more delicious are glides and trills than sure and severe notes, and yet not only the sophisticated but even the crowd will get tired of them if they are too much repeated. You can observe this with all the senses: perfumes compounded with an extra-sweet and penetrating scent do not please us so long as those that are moderately fragrant, and something with an earthy smell is preferred over the scent of saffron. Even to the touch there is a limit to the softness and lightness we like, and as to taste, the most pleasure-loving of the sense, which is most easily swayed by sweetness, how quickly does it not reject and dislike a surfeit of sweetness . . . thus we need not be surprised that in language too . . . we can have too much of the ornament . . . (*De Oratore*, III, 98).

With a clarity unsurpassed in critical discussions, Cicero had here analysed the reactions which are almost inevitably bound up with an increasing mastery of effects. The more the artist knows how to flatter the senses, the more he will mobilise defences against this flattery.[22] The very progress of his skill will lead to a longing for less skill and more honesty. It is this subjective reaction, this contrast in effects, which will tend to surround earlier phases of art or of speech with an aura of moral superiority. Of the existence of this aura Cicero had no doubt. He knew that antiquated speech could sound solemn or forceful, but he also knew that to pull out this stop on the organ of language was as risky as any other effect not carefully restrained. In trying to avoid an effeminate softness of tone some people go to another extreme and deliberately use the rustic accent of yokels to give their speech a greater flavour of antiquity. This is all the more sure to misfire as these people usually do not really master the genuine flavour of earlier ages and talk like boors when they want to speak like yeomen (III, 42,46).

What makes these discussions so relevant to our topic, is the implicit transition from an evolutionist view of the history of art to a relativist conception that sees every phase as an example of a particular stylistic mode. Later art, in other words, is not better than the earlier phase, it is only different. This difference, moreover is psychological rather than technical. The same evolution which, looked upon historically, appears as a progress from rigidity to softness, can also be seen as a gamut of possibilities between stern vigour and sweet grace. Looked upon from this point of view, the earlier phases of art can never be superseded by later ones because they represent forms of expressions which remain valid to later ages. Cicero himself, who was later to put forward the model of progress when it suited his polemical context, had shown more catholicity of taste in the earlier dialogue *De Oratore*:

There is one art of sculpture, in which Myron, Polycleitus and Lysippus were outstanding, all of whom differed from each other but in such a way that you would not wish any of them to be otherwise than he was. There is one skill and principle of painting and yet Zeuxis, Aglaophon and Apelles differ from each other: but none of them appears to lack anything in his art (III, 26).

If we can today still make some sense of Cicero's passage, if we have a mental picture of Myron, Polycleitus and Lysippus, we owe this of course to the fortunate fact that Cicero's compatriots shared his catholicity of taste and liked to decorate their houses and gardens impartially with copies of works representing these different styles. Perhaps the most striking illustration of this attitude to the panorama of the past is to be found in architecture. It is Cicero's presumably younger contemporary, Vitruvius, who deals with the succession of architectural styles, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, as a range of orders available for the architect's choice according to the character of the building with which he has to deal. Here too the evolution is interpreted in terms of expressive features. The Doric order is compared with the beauty of the stocky male body, the Ionic reflects the proportion of the female body with the third imitates the lithe delicacy of young girls (IV, I, 5-7). Accordingly the temple for Mars or Minerva should be built in the Doric style, that for Juno, Diana and Zeus in the Ionic, while Venus, Flora and the Nymphs are most suitably honoured by temples in the Corinthian order (I, ii, 5).

With this transformation of history into a succession of modes the way was clearly open for the appreciation of archaic art and primitive styles. That the ancient world went some way along this road can be inferred from the copies of archaic sculpture extant, particularly the work of so-called Neo-Attic school, which exploited the charm of tiptoeing maidens with their carefully pleated draperies and their angular movements.[23] Literary testimonies to this preference are absent from the time of Cicero. Indeed, the only explicit reference to archaising taste in the arts brings us back to the polemics of the orators and the debates about Cicero's position in history, which were in full cry again more than a

century after his death, at the time of Tacitus and Quintilian. By that time Cicero himself clearly represented one of the possible models available for choice in the schools of oratory and the contrasting opinions about the value of his art anticipate the discussions about the claims of Raphael in the nineteenth century. Those fragments of Tacitus's *Dialogue on Oratory* which have come down to us give pride of place to the progressivist view, whose spokesman protests against the adulation of old models. For him it is Cicero who has by now become old-fashioned and indeed archaic. His speeches, once accused of effeminacy, now strike the progressivist as 'like rough buildings' (22). Granted that their walls will last, they are surely lacking polish and lustre. Progress has continued since those days and teachers who want to return to Cicero after this lapse of time commit the same mistake which the reactionary Atticists committed in Cicero's defence. For him Cicero is not free from blemishes but he lived in a healthy age, before corruption was rife, as now. At any rate such failings as these earlier authors may have had are preferable to the meretricious licence of modern showmanship. In the eyes of Tacitus's speaker, this showmanship is the direct result of political conditions. Where free speech has languished, the instrument has ceased to serve its purpose and all that is left is empty virtuosity practised for its own sake.

Fascinating as is Tacitus's sociological analysis it is in his contemporary, Quintilian, that we find the most interesting discussion of Cicero's position. Quintilian is struck by the relativism of the critical verdicts passed on Cicero's style. He knows that the progressivists of his age dismissed this style as 'jejune and arid' (XII, x,13) and he reminds these critics that this was the style which the Atticists had found 'too florid' (*ibid*). One man's Asianism is another man's Atticism.

A sane middle-of-the-roader, Quintilian really fights on two fronts, against modernism and archaism. He despises the frills of the *corrupti* (VIII, iii, 7), and deplores the folly of the primitivists. These, he tells us, 'want to banish all care for style and plead that unpolished speech as it chances to bubble forth is much more natural and more manly' (IX, iv, 3). Such a view, he rightly urges, would be subversive of the whole art of oratory. If it is not permitted to introduce any improvements it was also wrong to exchange houses for huts, clothing for furs, and cities for mountains and forests... 'No!' he exclaims, 'that is most natural which nature allows best to be done' (IX, iv,5). Sane words, no doubt, but notoriously hard to translate into practical criticism. Is rhythm natural? Is rhyme? Must we respect the 'nature' of the medium, the colour of marble, the fibre of wood in sculpture, and how far must we carry this respect?

And so when Quintilian comes to recount the story of the progress of sculpture in Cicero's wake, he gives a less optimistic interpretation of the life-cycle of that art. Calon is rather hard, Calamis less rigid, Myron softer. Polycleitus surpassed all others for industry and beauty, but it is said that he is lacking in 'weight'. For while he is said to have added more beauty to the human form, even beyond the truth, he does not seem to have endowed the gods with enough authority. It is true that Phidias had what Polycleitus lacked, but he in his turn was more successful with gods than with men. They say that Lysippus and Praxiteles came closest to the truth, while Demetrius is accused of having gone too far in this direction and having been more enamoured of truth than of beauty (XII, x, 9).

We see how for Quintilian the ideal recedes from his grasp. There is always too little of something or too much of the other in every artist. As beauty comes in, dignity goes out; as truthfulness increases, beauty suffers. The result is a cautious pluralism which is aware of the variability of taste.

It is in the context of these polemics that we gain the most precious hint of all about the existence of primitivist leanings among art-lovers. There are people, we learn, who prefer the promise of an art to its fulfilment: 'The first famous painters whose works are worth seeing for other reasons than their

antiquity are Polynotus and Aglaophon, whose simple colouring nevertheless has such admirers that they prefer these rude beginnings of a future skill to the greatest works that came after' (XII, x, 3). It is true that Quintilian professes to doubt the honesty of this admiration. He suspects an admixture of snobbishness in such a preference: 'Such people, I think, want to show off their connoisseurship.'

Whatever the truth of Quintilian's accusation we must, of course, see it in the context of his polemics and the context leads us back to the psychological issues of language. Here as always it is the avoidance of sweetness which drives the orator back to the use of harsher sounds and rhythms. We learn from Quintilian that one orator 'so much shrank from the soft delicacy of voluptuous modulations that he interposed obstacles to inhibit the flow of these rhythms' (IX, iv, 31). The dignity and force of archaic speech provides, in this sense, the model of our attitude towards early art. 'Antiquity', says Quintilian, 'imparts dignity' (VIII, iii, 24). Old words can give our speech 'an air of sanctity and majesty'. He especially commends Vergil for the skill and tact with which he makes use of this device, 'which gives his work that inimitable authority of antiquity which is also so very attractive in paintings' (VIII, iii, 25).

For Vergil we may put T. S. Eliot:

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie-
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
Whiche betokeneth concorde . . .

(East Coker)

Quintilian was certainly sensitive to the spell of these archaic modes. His famous characterization of the style of the early Roman poet Ennius foreshadows in mood and imagery the romantic champions of medieval poetry:

Let us worship him, as we do sacred groves, hallowed by age, where the grand old oak trees are perhaps not as beautiful as they are awe-inspiring (X, I, 88).

But such appreciation can lead to affectation when the attempt is made to tap these effects in a modern context. Seneca scornfully speaks of orators who want to 'talk like the twelve tables'[24] with their solemn inflexible style.

Here, as in Cicero, the transposition of a historical sequence into one of expressive possibilities leads to the problem of the limits of artifice.

This is the central problem to which the most influential of all ancient treatises on rhetoric addresses itself, the fragment known as 'Longinus *On the Sublime*' (21). Ostensibly, it is a monograph on one particular effect or mode of style, one of the stops the orator can pull out. But it soon becomes apparent that in the author's eye this special treatment is needed, for the 'sublime' is one of the most

tricky effects in the orator's armoury. One false step and it degenerates into the frigid or bombastic. The study of the great models of the past serves to show how these masters achieved the truly sublime without falling victim to bathos. Homer is his favourite instance, but it is well known that the treatise includes among its illustrations of true sublimity the account of 'the Jewish Lawgiver' in Genesis: 'God said' -what? ' "let there be light", and there was light. "Let there be earth", and there was earth' (IX, 10).

But such grandeur is not at everybody's beck and call. Indeed, it cannot be achieved by a simple act of will. And so, having subtly analysed the effects of sound and rhythms which contribute to the sublime, 'Longinus' comes out against the conception of oratory as a skill. Speech is expression and expression cannot be feigned. The true sublime is not a manufactured effect, it is in his famous phrase, 'the ring of a noble soul'. It was this stand in favour of an 'expressionist' theory of style which secured for Longinus his mounting prestige among ancient critics after his re-discovery in the late Renaissance.[25] His greatness is not in doubt; and yet it could be argued that his solution amounted to little more than a surrender to what I have called 'the physiognomic fallacy'. Like other Greek teachers of rhetoric he sees the soul in the style. All those associations which are evoked for all of us by archaic modes of speech become thus symptoms of bygone virtues. We all, as we have seen, react in this way when we encounter the stately rhythms and even the unfamiliar spelling of Elizabethan diction. It is difficult to imagine a mean little crook speaking in the accents of the Authorised Version. One of the reasons for this increase in stateliness is precisely that ancient modes of speech tend to survive most securely within the conservative rituals of religion and of law. It is in this way that they acquire not only the 'pathos of distance' but the halo of solemnity. The very contrast with the rapid change of contemporary jargon imparts an aura of immutable grandeur. We have seen that orators were skilled in exploiting this contrast for their various modes of speech in antiquity no less than in our own days. Who was more adept in pulling out the stops of Elizabethan grandeur than Sir Winston Churchill? It is no accident that here, as always, the effect of these archaic sublimities is bound up with patriotic sentiments in the original sense of the word. The appeal to history is the appeal of the fathers and ancestors whose ancient virtues cannot and must not be questioned.

All these overtones are relevant to our subject in so far as they help to explain the psychological disposition in which primitivism can thrive. Pride in progress is easily accompanied by guilt feelings. For have we not departed from the ways and manners of our fathers? Thus the physiognomic reaction to early styles becomes bound up with a moral nostalgia. We are no longer capable of the sublime because we lack the noble soul that alone can produce it. Paradoxically this physiognomic reaction can be reinforced by that image of progress which was the one known to the classical tradition -the image of growth and decay in the life-cycle of arts and skills. If the arts had their childhood before they reached maturity and declined towards an inevitable death their early phase could gather upon itself all the emotions we usually project on to childhood and youth. Those were the days of innocence, spontaneity and naïve enjoyment, of uncorrupted chastity and guileless honesty. Imperceptibly, and thus all the more powerfully the two contradictory images could merge. The stern old ancestors were at the same time innocent youth. They were old because they were born so long ago, they were young because they lived in the childhood of the world.

In their famous book on *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*[26] George Boas and Arthur O. Lovejoy wittily and pertinently distinguished between what they called 'soft' and 'hard' primitivism. The dream of the golden age of peace and plenty represents the soft variety, the myth of the heroic age when man took up the struggle with monsters, the hard one. Perhaps it belongs to the attractions of primitive style that here these two contradictory virtues appear to be fused. Which side will lie

uppermost depends perhaps largely on the state of our conscience. When we are most worried about the softness and effeminacy of our civilisation it will be the strength and robustness of the past that will appeal to us most. When we are more aware of our moral failings it will be the innocence of the idyll that will captivate our imagination.

The preceding pages have shown how these psychological reactions were used and rationalised in the schools of rhetoric and to what extent they were underlying the divisions between opposing camps of criticism. Reference to the visual arts in these debates is usually incidental, but also served later critics to equate the problems of style in ancient oratory with problems in the visual arts. That dread of corruption that goes with the classical ideal could feed on the denunciation of Asianism all the more easily as there was authority for such comparison in an ancient writer. It was Petronius who had blamed the death of oratory and of painting on the same kind of foreign corruption:

Recently that puffed-up and monstrous verbosity invaded Athens from Asia and filled the mind of aspiring youngsters like an epidemic, and thus eloquence was corrupted, came to a full stop and expired . . . Painting died in the same way after the impertinence of the Egyptians had invented a short cut for that great craft . . .[27]

There has been much discussion what the 'impertinence' of the Egyptians really was and in what way their vicious short-cut methods can have contributed to the decline of painting. We may never know but what matters in our context is only that some new-fangled trick is being contrasted with the painstaking seriousness of honest craftsmanship. And in this respect the tone and tendency of Petronius's complaint is strangely similar to Vitruvius's famous attack on the fashion of grotesque decorations which supplanted the earlier style of simulated architectural prospects in his days of 'declining morality' (*iniquis moribus*). These new, absurd and illogical plays of fancy have even led bad judges to condemn solid craftsmanship as dull! The downfall, alas, is easy to explain:

The aims which the ancients sought to realise by their painstaking craftsmanship, the present attains by coloured materials and their enticing appearance. The dignity which buildings used to gain by the subtle skill of the craftsman is now not even missed, owing to the lavish expenditure of the client (VII, 7)

The complaint about luxury and laxity could thus be used with effect to account for the feeling that the great days of art were over and that the classic period was receding into the remote past. It was antiquity itself which bequeathed to posterity the myth of its decline through a loss of moral fibre. The idea of the Romans of the decadence indulging their appetites while vigorous Teutonic tribes made ready to inherit the earth was fostered by Roman moralists. That corruption which Plato had dreaded as the danger to the state now seemed to have overtaken their civilisation. And thus the very prestige of ancient authorities helped to preserve the seeds of primitivism together with the classical heritage. When in the seventeenth century the Dutch humanist Franciscus Junius, secretary to the Earl of Arundel, collected the testimonies on *The Painting of the Ancients* it was natural that his book should culminate in a summons to ancient virtue as expressed in the theory of art. In reading the following extract[28] we can see how such a collection must have affected Winckelmann, the prophet of Greek virtue, no less than the champions of the Age of Faith.

Dionys. Halycarnassensis[29] giveth us one reason, when he maintaineth, That the antient pictures in a wonderfull simplicity of colours drew their chiefest commendation from a more accurate and gracefull designe. The new pictures on the contrary being but carelesly designed, stood most of all upon the manifold mixture of their colours, and upon an affectation of light and shadowes. See

Themistius[30] also, Orat. De Amic. where he toucheth the very same point. The other reason seemes to flow out of the former: for as the first reason preferreth the antient workes before the new, in regard of their gracefulness, so doth the second attribute unto the old workes a certaine kinde of majesty, yet so, that it was their simplicitie made them majesticall. Phorph.[31] sayth, That the new images of the gods are admired for the dignity of the work, but the antient are revered for the simplicity of the worke, as being more suitable to the majesty of the gods. Pausanias[32] likewise speaking of Daedalus, sayth that his works were not very handsome to looke on, but that there was in them a certaine kinde of divine majesty which did become them very much. Silius Italicus[33] doth also note this peculiar property in the antient images of gods, That they kept as yet the godhead bestowed upon them by art.

1 This paper is an extract of a study I am preparing of these developments. Among previous treatments of the subject I should like to quote Camillo von Klenze, 'The Growth of Interest in the Early Italian Masters from Tischbein to Ruskin', *Modern Philology*, iv, October 1906, pp. 1-68; Tancred Borenius, 'The Rediscovery of the Primitives', *The Quarterly Review*, 239, no.475, April 1923; Lionello Venturi, *Il Gusto dei Primitivi*, Bologna, 1926 ; Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, New York, 1938; Suzanne Sulzberger, *La Rehabilitation des Primitifs Flamands, 1802-1867*, Brussels, 1961; Giovanni Previtali, *La Fortuna dei Primitivi dal Vasari ai Neoclassici*, Turin, 1964.

2 I have alluded to these origins in my book *Art and Illusion*, New York and London, 1960 (see its Index under Rhetoric) ; and in 'Mannerism: The historiographic background', *Studies in Western Art (Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art)*, ii, Princeton, N.J., 1963, pp. 163-73.

3 Since they are so well known I have confined the critical apparatus to a minimum. I have used the available bilingual editions in Loeb's Classical Library but have felt free to rephrase the translations.

4 K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London, 1945, Chapter 10.

5 Eduard Norden, *Die Antike Kunstprosa vom 6. Jahrhundert vor Christus his in die Zeit der Renaissance*, Leipzig, 1915-18.

6 Apart from Norden, op. cit., see now A. D. Leeman, *Orationis Ratio, The Stylistic Theories and Practice of the Roman Orators, Historians and Philosophers*, Amsterdam, 1963.

7 S. F. Bonner, *The Literary Treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, Cambridge, 1939.

8 I have previously used this letter in my paper on Mannerism quoted above.

9 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Opuscula*, ed. H. Usener and L. Rademacher, Leipzig, 1899ff., i, pp. 3-5. A full literal translation of this is in J. D. Denniston, *Greek Literary Criticism*, London, 1924, pp. 150-2.

10 Larue van Hook, *Metaphorical Terminology of Greek Rhetoric*, Chicago, 1905.

11 Franz Quadlbauer, *Die Genera dicendi bis Plinius den Jüngerem*, Vienna, 1958 (Wiener Studien 71).

12 Dionysius of Halicarnassus comparing Isocrates and Demosthenes, Demosthenes, xxii, ed. cit., p. 176, English in S. F. Bonner, *The Literary Treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, Cambridge, 1939, p. 65.

13 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Collocatione Verborum*, xxii, ed. cit., ii, p. 179, translated by W. Rhys Roberts, 1910.

14 Demetrius, *On Style*, i, 14.

15 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratorio*, XII, x, 13; this account and that in Tacitus, *Dialogus*, p. 18, are our principal sources for this controversy. Cf. Leeman, loc. cit. 16 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Judicium de Isocrate*, iii, ed. cit., p. 59.

17 Giovanni Becatti, *Arte e gusto negli scrittori latini*, Florence, 1951, p. 53, referring to Aristotle, *Topica* vi, ii.

18 Carl Robert, 'Die Kunsterteile des Plinius', in *Archäologische München*, Berlin, 1886.

19 Cf. my paper 'Vasari's Lives and Cicero's Brutus', *this Journal*, XXIII, 1960, pp. 309-11.

20 Cf. my paper 'Norma e Forma; Critica valutativa e Morfologia stilistica nella Storia dell' Arte', *Filosofia*, xiv, 1963, pp. 445-64; repr. in English in my book *Norm and Form*, 1966.

21 See Quadlbauer, op. cit.

22 Cf. my paper 'Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art', repr. in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, London, 1963.

23 Eduard Schmidt, *Archaistische Kunst in Griechenland und Rom*, Munich, 1922; Heinrich Bulle, "Archaisierende Griechische Rundplastik", *Abh. der Bayr. Akad. d. W.; phil. hist.*, xxx, 1918, p. 2; Frank P. Chambers, *Cycles of Taste; an unacknowledged Problem in Ancient Art and Criticism*, Cambridge, Mass., 1928.

24 Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistolae morales*, Lib. xix, Epist. V (114).

25 Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime, a Study of Critical Theories in 18th Century England*, New York, 1935.

26 Baltimore, 1935.

27 *Satyricon*, 2.

28 London, 1638, pp. 350-1.

29 *De Isaeo*, iv, ed. cit., p. 96.

30 Themistius, *Orationes*, xxxiii, ed. D. Petavius, Paris, 1684, p. 281.

31 Porphyrius, *De Abstinencia*, ii.

32 *Corinth*, II, iv, 5.

33 *Punica*, xiv, 653.